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Leeuwarden 2018: Complexity of Leisure-led Regional Development in a European Capital of Culture

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Abstract

Leeuwarden was chosen as European Capital of Culture (ECOC) for 2018. We address, through a complexity perspective, how leisure characteristics of the ECOC can affect regional development in Fryslân. Three aspects are identified that make leisure-led regional development complex: 1) fragmentation of the leisure sector; 2) balance between developing leisure and protecting existing social, cultural and ecological qualities; and 3) difficulties obtaining crossovers between leisure and broader regional development. In an analysis of policy documents for the 2018 ECOC, we observe that although the interactions central to these complexities are recognized they are not captured in the monitoring of the ECOC effects through quantified targets such as attracting four million tourists. We argue that an approach that constantly acknowledges the interactions within leisure is required for a positive effect on regional development to emerge. This necessitates a process in which targets can be adapted according to changing circumstances.

Keywords

European Capital of Culture; Fryslân; Leisure; Regional Development; Complexity

1. Introduction

Leeuwarden, capital of the Dutch province of Fryslân, was elected European Capital of Culture (ECOC) for 2018. The city was considered the underdog, due to its small size and low budget compared to the other candidate cities, Maastricht and Eindhoven¹. Nonetheless, the jury unanimously recommended Leeuwarden as “providing the best potential and capacity for the organization of an impactful

programme” (European Commission, 2013, p. 9). According to the event organization, the 2018 ECOC “will bring about a major economic boost for Leeuwarden and the province of Fryslân” (Stichting Kulturele Haadstêd, 2013b). However, such a boost, whether economic, social or cultural, is not guaranteed.

The impact of ECOCs has been studied in many cities, for example Glasgow (Miles, 2005; Mooney, 2004), Rotterdam (Richards & Wilson, 2004), Salamanca (Herrero, 2006), Liverpool (Campbell, 2011; Liu, 2014), Umeå (Åkerlund & Müller, 2012) and several Eastern European cities (Lähdesmäki, 2014). Effects of hosting an ECOC event include economic, socio-cultural and life-satisfaction aspects (Herrero, 2006; Liu, 2014; Steiner et al., 2015). Leisure, which we use as an encompassing concept that refers to tourism and recreation related phenomena (Walmsley, 2003), often plays a central role in ECOCs. This is recognized by aforementioned studies, but mainly in a modular and statistically driven approach. We argue that the ECOC can spur leisure-led regional development, but a holistic approach is required to understand the economic, social, cultural and ecological effects, which the organization claims should be “underpinned by methods that promote connection, dialogue and interaction” (Stichting Kulturele Haadstêd, 2013a, p. 1). Therefore, we use a complexity perspective to explore how, through the ECOC, leisure can strengthen a region in economic, but also social, cultural and ecological sense (Hartman & De Roo, 2013; Meekes, Parra & De Roo, 2017).

A complexity perspective entails the recognition that there is a fundamental uncertainty underlying leisure-led regional development. This uncertainty stems from the interactions in leisure, which also relate to the effects of the ECOC. Based on complexity thinking (Cilliers, 2005; Martin & Sunley, 2007) we can discover patterns in this uncertainty. Parts in a system, for instance individual firms or actors in the leisure sector, adapt based on their interactions with other parts. This causes self-confirming patterns to emerge on a higher level, a process of self-organization (Martin & Sunley, 2007). These patterns are not governed by collective intent, but by the interactions between individually adapting parts. For leisure, this can mean individual actors responding to the behavior of others, or to changes in their environment or the institutional context. We highlight three aspects of leisure that produce such complex interactions: 1) fragmentation of the leisure sector; 2) balance between development of leisure and protection of existing qualities; 3) crossovers between leisure and broader regional development. We argue that acknowledging interactions in planning for the ECOC is of vital importance for dealing with fundamental uncertainties and for achieving the desired boost for the region. This also requires the integration of such complex interactions in planning actions and monitoring.

We explore the extent to which the complexities of leisure-led regional development are considered in planning for the 2018 ECOC in Leeuwarden. We analyze various types of documents connected to leisure in Fryslân, selected because they communicate the current policies and strategies concerning leisure and the 2018 ECOC: 1) the current provincial economic policy document (Provincie Fryslân, 2012), 2) memoranda on leisure and the accompanying monitoring report (Provincie Fryslân, 2007, 2014b, 2015), 3) the bid book for Leeuwarden 2018 ECOC (Stichting Kulturele Haadstêd, 2013a), and 4) supporting communication from the province, the municipality and the Capital of Culture Foundation such as websites and press releases (Stichting Kulturele Haadstêd, 2013b, 2015). These documents were coded through a critical reading using the aspects of complexity discussed in this paper as identifiable topics. This process involved multiple readings, to allow for familiarization with the texts, the

coding process itself and a reflection based on the literature (cf. Buda, d’Hauteserre, & Johnston, 2014). References to interactions and to fragmentation, balance and crossovers were highlighted in both the strategic texts and concrete measures. We observe that the complexities of leisure-led regional development are acknowledged in strategic texts but omitted from the concluding evaluation criteria and targets. We argue that this can divert the focus from the underlying goals of the ECOC, formulated in the strategic text, to a representation of reality constructed based on simplified criteria. In this manner such targets and evaluation criteria omit the more complex goals that could provide an ECOC event with a lasting legacy.

2. Contextual Background: Leeuwarden as ECOC 2018

Based on past experiences across Europe, the ECOC event is considered to contribute to urban regeneration and the creative industries (Campbell, 2011; García, 2004; Lähdesmäki, 2014). Often, a major goal of ECOC programs is to stimulate leisure in the region to spark broader regional development. This regional focus is reflected by the initial intention in Fryslân to apply as province, which was changed to the Leeuwarden bid after it became clear that only a city could apply. For many ECOCs, attracting tourists is one of the most important objectives (Palmer, 2004), as observed in the bidding procedure for the 2008 ECOC in the UK (Griffiths, 2006). Studies of previous ECOCs, for instance Rotterdam, show that the event can indeed positively affect the number of tourists (Richards & Wilson, 2004). However, it is not only by attracting more tourists that the ECOC event can influence leisure-led regional development. ECOC promotional and planning texts also focus “on citizens and their experiences of feeling cosy and at home” in the city and on their possibilities for spending leisure time in this urban space (Lähdesmäki, 2014, p. 488).

Leeuwarden is the capital of the province of Fryslân, which together with Groningen and Drenthe forms the Northern Netherlands. Fryslân has an area of 574,875 hectares (with over 40% water) and a population just under 650,000 (Provincie Fryslân, 2014a). The rural province is characterized by the bordering Wadden Sea, lakes and canals, large agricultural lands and wooded areas. Agriculture is spatially prominent (78% land use) but is economically surpassed by retail, industry, and services. In recent years leisure has received more attention as a potential growth sector. Tourists visit the province for water(sports), the eleven historical cities, and in general ‘peace and space’. The regional identity is shaped by the official language (Frisian, the second official language of the Netherlands) but also by the small scale and authenticity of leisure in the province. This is reflected in Leeuwarden, which despite a population around 100,000 on 1,704 hectares (ibid.) still retains a small-scale atmosphere.

For Leeuwarden as ECOC, the focus on leisure-led regional development beyond its economic meaning is prominent, for instance by increasing the attraction of Fryslân and developing innovative tourism concepts. These are objectives in the bid book, the program for 2018 which was the basis for the selection of Leeuwarden by the European jury (Stichting Kulturele Haadstêd, 2013a, p. 4). The importance of leisure within the ECOC program is reflected in the event’s theme of ‘Open Society’ (‘Iepen Mienskip’), meant to represent the hospitality of the region (Stichting Kulturele Haadstêd, 2015). On the provincial level, in the Dutch context often most prominent in leisure policy, the role of the ECOC in stimulating leisure-led regional development corresponds with longer standing policies; the provincial memorandum on leisure formulates the ambition to make Fryslân a top attraction in the Netherlands

(Provincie Fryslân, 2007). The vision for the current economic policy lists leisure as a main policy priority (Provincie Fryslân, 2012).



Figure 1. *ECOC 2018 candidates in the Netherlands*

3. Aspects of complexity in leisure-led regional development

Like Fryslân, many rural and peripheral regions without a strong industrial or service sector focus on leisure to increase economic output (Dana et al., 2014; Hartman & De Roo, 2013; Ravenscroft & Reeves, 1999). Competition with core economic areas is not feasible, but a peripheral location and lower population density result in qualities valuable for leisure; green spaces, waterscapes, tranquility or a rural idyll can be the basis of an economy based on leisure and of ‘living in leisure rich areas’, especially in the Northern Netherlands (Hermans & De Roo, 2006). Developing leisure makes the region more attractive as an area in which to live and work. This can lead to the emergence of new developments in other sectors with firms or entrepreneurs relocating for the area’s leisure qualities. This reasoning highlights the complexity of leisure-led regional development. Here we discuss three aspects of leisure-led regional development that shape its complexity and relate them to the ECOC event.

I) The *fragmentation of the leisure* sector is reflected in a high proportion of small local firms (Ecorys, 2009), especially in rural and peripheral areas, such as Fryslân (Hermans & de Roo, 2006). It is worth noting that in the strongly regulated culture of Dutch planning, leisure has historically received little attention, falling outside the rural division between nature and agricultural. The fragmented nature of leisure means that local entrepreneurs focus on competition with neighboring firms, and lack the capacity to oversee potential mutual gains within the region (Provincie Fryslân, 2014b). As such, initiatives beneficial to the region as a whole are in some cases less welcomed by entrepreneurs, who perceive them as benefiting their competitors. Additionally, small companies have fewer resources for strategic interactions with other entrepreneurs in the region (Benur & Bramwell, 2015). For the ECOC program, involving local actors in the regional context is difficult, but also crucial to the success of the event as “planning efforts that are imposed on stakeholders, rather than developed together with them, have little effect on outcomes” (Åkerlund & Müller, 2012, p. 168).

II) There is a precarious *balance between developing leisure and protecting existing qualities* or amenities that make a region attractive. The influx of tourists (e.g. the four million targeted for 2018; Stichting Kulturele Haadstêd, 2013a) could affect the tranquility of Fryslân, one of its main selling points. Other negative effects can accompany an expansion of the leisure sector. Regions hosting ECOC events between 1985-2002 showed higher housing costs and an increased crime rate (Steiner et al., 2015). Relatively small changes in leisure can have strong effects on the region as a whole. It is therefore necessary to find the balance or synergy between developing leisure and protecting the qualities of the region, especially when these qualities are essential for the success of the leisure sector.

III) *Crossovers between leisure and broader regional development* make leisure transcend the purely economic (Hermans & de Roo, 2006), but such effects are often uncertain. The increased attractiveness of a region might entice people to live and work in the area, but this depends upon many other factors, not least of which the macroeconomic circumstances. Although leisure development could stimulate the conservation of service levels in the area, the seasonal nature of many leisure activities can make this unpredictable (Dana et al., 2014). Leisure can be beneficial to natural areas, as people are more inclined to protect areas that they have visited and appreciated, but the activities themselves can also be damaging (Puhakka & Saarinen, 2013). Specifically for the ECOC program, positive effects can be limited to specific groups of inhabitants, often not including the more deprived neighborhoods as observed in

Glasgow (Mooney, 2004) and Liverpool (Liu, 2014). The interactions between various facets of regional development therefore largely determine the extent to which the aims of events like the ECOC can be obtained.

These complexities of leisure-led regional development show the importance of interactions. It is through these interactions that leisure-led regional development emerges as a self-confirming and self-organizing pattern. By acknowledging and enabling such interactions the ECOC can have an effect that goes beyond the 2018 event and can emerge as leisure-led regional development. In the following, we discuss to what extent the aspects of complexity mentioned here are dealt with in the plans for the 2018 event.

4. A Complexity Perspective in Frisian Leisure and ECOC Policies

The bid book for Leeuwarden 2018 refers to the ECOC as “a large-scale cultural intervention” meant to tackle the social, economic and ecological challenges facing Leeuwarden, “underpinned by methods that promote connection, dialogue and interaction” (Stichting Kulturele Haadstêd, 2013a, p. 1). This recognizes the aspect of interconnectedness and crossovers between leisure and regional development. The main theme of the bid book, ‘iepen Mienskip’ (Frisian for ‘open community’), is meant to embrace bottom-up solidarity. This focus on interactions between different actors and on connections within the community deals with the aspect of fragmentation. The aspect of balance between development and protection is least explicitly considered in the bid book, although the way in which the program builds on existing leisure policies and developments can be viewed in this light. On the strategic level, the bid book thus conveys a (basic) recognition of the complexity of regional development.

On the provincial level, the current economic policy document states as its main goal a sustainable economic development based on knowledge and innovation through strong networks of entrepreneurs, education and research institutes and governments. The leisure sector is considered to offer a perspective of creative and innovative solutions for strengthening livability and attractiveness of the province (Provincie Fryslân, 2012). The policy document specifically for leisure, called ‘Hospitable Fryslân’, stresses the potential for leisure to function as a connecting theme to strengthen crossovers between sectors and to offer solutions for cleaner water, sustainable energy usage, healthier food and better health (Provincie Fryslân, 2014b). This again points to crossovers between leisure and broader regional development. Additionally, the aspect of fragmentation is acknowledged by stating that the small scale of many companies creates a low innovation potential and marketing and promotion is often uncoordinated. The policy documents further stress that Fryslân does not aim at an international mass tourism market, but wants to target niches of cultural and nature-based tourism that suit the existing qualities (Provincie Fryslân, 2011, 2014b). In this way, the province recognizes the importance of the balance between development and protection.

Conversely, both the ECOC bid book and the provincial policy documents formulate targets and evaluation criteria differently from the utilized strategic phrasing. The ECOC bid book lists several indicators meant to measure the success of the event in terms of visits, expenditure and participation amongst others (Stichting Kulturele Haadstêd, 2013a). Many of these indicators are, perhaps unsurprisingly, formulated as quantifiable numbers. However, the connections and interactions between

various indicators remain ill-defined. The effects the targeted four million tourists in 2018 will have on other topics, for example cultural vibrancy, is not discussed. Similarly, the provincial program for tourism and recreation presents leisure as a connecting theme for crossovers between sectors, but the main targets are an increase in tourist overnight stays, visits and expenditure and a growth in the number of jobs in the leisure sector (Provincie Fryslân, 2014b). The first monitoring report for the policy document on leisure measures and discusses each of the goals and targets separately (Provincie Fryslân, 2015). The main targets in terms of visitor numbers and tourism spending are plotted in graphs with trend lines and a final target that is to be achieved, not reflecting the interconnectedness and resulting uncertainty discussed in the strategic text.

The discrepancy between the strategic phrasing in the policy documents and the segmented and linear evaluation criteria is understandable. Targets are used to judge performance and hold policy makers accountable. However, when such targets gain too much importance, this creates a separate representation of reality that does not include the importance of interactions between the different aspects of leisure-led regional development. As the goals of the ECOC related to leisure-led regional development are dependent upon the complex and dynamic interactions discussed in this paper, recognizing such interactions is crucial for the desired effects of the event to emerge. Although few would advocate a simplistic approach, the way targets and evaluation criteria are defined can have this consequence. By allowing targets and evaluation criteria to co-evolve more openly within the changing context of the ECOC planning process, the complexities central to leisure-led regional development can be better acknowledged.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper we used a complexity perspective to discuss leisure-led regional development in Fryslân, and specifically the ECOC 2018 in Leeuwarden. This event supports the provincial policies on leisure, aimed at stimulating regional development. Although the ECOC is generally considered a prestigious and often successful event, three aspects make regional development based on such leisure-related events complex. These include the fragmented nature of the leisure sector, the balance between development of leisure and protection of existing qualities, and achieving crossovers between leisure and broader regional development. These connective properties shape the major goals of the ECOC in the provincial policies. However, this does not seem to translate into the targets and evaluation criteria, which omit mutual interactions.

It is not surprising that plans list quantified targets and criteria. However, to achieve goals that are sector-transcending and focus on interaction, the connections between various targets must take a central position. The interactions between the different aspects of the ECOC are the driving force of leisure-led regional development as an emergent and fundamentally uncertain process. This requires a planning approach that is less focused on quantified results, but aims at constantly acknowledging the interactions beyond such targets. In our view, this calls for a process in which not only the content of planning policy but also the formulation of targets and evaluation criteria is allowed to co-evolve and adapt to changing circumstances and arising patterns. This creates opportunities to take advantage of unexpected nonlinear opportunities which can be pivotal for the legacy of the 2018 ECOC for the province of Fryslân.

¹ The Hague and Utrecht had already been eliminated in the preselection phase

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